DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 789 SO 020 655

AUTHOR Hanna, Jack C.
TITLE Who Controls the Video?
PUB DATE Sep 89
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Development of Democracy after World War II in Germany and the United States (North Rhine-Westphalia, West Germany, September 24-30, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communications; Critical Viewing; Democracy; Mass Media; Mass Media Effects; *Mass Media Role; *Mass Media Use; News Media; Political Campaigns; Political Science; *Popular Culture; *Television; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS Deregulation; Fairness Doctrine; Federal Communications Commission; *Television Criticism; Television History

ABSTRACT

Television plays a monumentally large role in U.S. society; no one is immune from its effects. The government does not control television, but it is not far from the truth to say that television controls the political life of this country. This paper analyzes the democratic objectives and effects of television in the United States. A brief history of government regulation of television, including the fairness doctrine and the deregulation of the 1980s, is given. Positive and negative effects arise from deregulation. With television dominating U.S. democratic politics, the image of the candidate matters more than the substantive position on the issues; commercials can and do win elections; and Ronald Reagan and his advisers were able manipulators of the medium. Television holds vast potential in a democratic society, yet reforms must be undertaken and citizens must be educated to view television with the understanding of what it is doing to them. A 19-item bibliography concludes this paper. (DB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED320789

WHO CONTROLS THE VIDEO?

Jack C. Hanna, J.D.
South Carolina Bar Pro Bono
and LRE Director
University of South Carolina
College of Criminal Justice
Columbia, South Carolina
United States of America

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

JACK C. HANNA

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 020 655

For Delivery at the Conference
on Development of Democracy After
World War II in Germany and the United States

National Council for the Social Studies
and Bundeszentrale Fur Politische Bildung
Justizakademie of North Rhine-Westphalia
24-30 September 1989

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

WHO CONTROLS THE VIDEO ?

Television is extremely important in the daily life of the average American citizen. Its importance has been recognized by the New York State Legislature which passed a bill declaring a television set to be a "utensil necessary for a family" along with clothes, furniture and kitchen equipment, exempt from seizure during bankruptcy.

Ninety eight percent of all Americans have at least one television. There are twice as many televisions as the total circulation of all newspapers. Personally I have four. One is thirteen inches and black and white and twenty years old. Two are big color sets. One is a solar watchman type TV. I spent nine years as a writer-producer-content specialist for public television. I have worked on over 65 television programs.

Television is the dominant force in American culture today. Only 8% of Americans claim that they do not watch TV. Most of them are lying. Sixty Seven percent of Americans say they get most of their news from TV. According to Connoisseur, Spetember, 1989, a recent survey of American adults revealed that 36% of Americans listed watching television as the activity they most look forward to every day and the average American watches about 6 hours of television each day. This issue of Connoiseur contains many interesting statistics which will be referred to throughout this paper. Television is a mirror of our society and like our private mirror, we just keep staring at it. Our TV sets sit unobtrusively in the corners of our rooms totally passive.

But once switched on, as the rock group which took its name from a boring TV format, the "Talking Heads", say in their song called "Television Man":

> "I'm looking and I'm dreaming for the first time. I'm inside and I'm outside at the same time. And everything is real. Do I like the way I feel? When the world crashes in, into my living room - television made me what I am - People like to put the television down but we are just good friends. I'm a television man."

The song goes on to refrain:

> "I'm watching everything, I'm watching everything." "Little Creatures," Talking Heads 1985, Sire Records Company. And in fact <u>we are</u> watching everything.

Yes Americans have crawled into the television mirror and back out and many seem incapable of distinguishing TV fantasy from the so called real world. The actor who played Marcus Welby M.D., was often approached on the street when recognized and asked for medical advice. Later he did an aspirin commercial. There I've said it, commercial. Yes by age eighteen American children have seen 350,000 of them. The average program time between commercials in the United States is 9.5 minutes and 4.5 minutes during movies. In fact in America the more popular the programing, the greater the number of commercials one is likely to see. During the 1988 Summer Olympics one hundred eighty hours were broadcast. Forty of those hours were commercials.

Let's switch back to the mirror concept and confused reality. It has been reported that President Reagan, who is certainly a testament to the power of television himself, recently wrote a letter to a soap opera actress's TV character

expressing concern over her illness. Educated Americans look at the television mirror with a jaundiced eye but look at it they do. They call their $1,000 TV's idiot boxes, and a distaste for T.V. is a must for anyone claiming the status of "intellectual". And yet as the humanities and fine arts, and especially theatre, decline, television remains a strong, powerful, funny, ubiquitous, intermingly, pervasive interpreter of life, culture and politics in one of the largest democracies on the face of the globe, the globe which we have all seen pictures of via television from outer space.

Television is a mirror of American culture because television in America is not controlled by the government. Only 9% of Americans think the government should regulate television. TV is controlled by market forces and corporate attempts to please the public and get its attention, a very difficult task indeed. In American household's with incomes of $15,000 the average amount of time between channel changes is six minutes and 15 seconds, for households with $75,000 incomes the average is one channel change every two minutes and 42 seconds.

Channel changing, choices, finally we approach some semblance of a discussion of democracy. Television is in the opinion of those who spawn the shows, videos, documentaries, and events the center piece of a modern cultural democracy. The program offerings are made and the people freely choose which ones to watch. The offerings which attract the most viewers are the ones which stay on the air, produce spin offs and become

reruns. Who controls the video? We the people do with remote control devices in hand we quickly review a moments offering from a choice of between four and yes, one hundred sixty channels. We settle into one channel until a commercial comes then we hit the mute button so we don't have to listen to it if it's a cheap commercial or one we've seen 100 times. When we get bored we cut it off.

Now lets switch our attention to the topic at hand, the democratic objectives and effects of television. Lets kick into the linear rational mind. Let's stop changing the subject. Lets start making sense.

In analyzing the democratic objectives and effects of television in the U.S. one must first begin with a description of the role of television in our society. I hope the foregoing pages have shed some light on that issue. It has already been stated that the government does not control television in the United States. I believe this is true, but the government has in the past and continues to exercise a great deal of control over who gets to own television stations through its licensing powers which granted monopolies prior to cable TV, direct broadcast satellite, video cassettes and discs, low power TV stations, and multipoint directional service.

Today local city and county governments are in the monopoly granting business while exercising their power to decide which of two or more competing cable-TV enterprises are given the right to service a particular geographic area. This decision has less to

do with programing content than it has to do with quality of service and who the politicians want to make all the money.

The U.S. Government has always had a first amendment based hands off policy when it comes to regulating the print media, but because of the monopolistic nature of television licensing, from the 1940's until 1987, the United States Government's Federal Communications Commision (FCC) enforced a policy called the "Fairness Doctrine" requiring the broadcaster at its expense to give adequate coverage to public issues fairly and accurately reflecting opposing views. The reasons for this policy included the fact that because there were relatively few licensed stations and because the medium of television was so powerful, access to the medium for diverse opinion was required to insure reasoned public debate and to insure that the grant of a television monopoly would not produce an abuse of power by the licensee ignoring alternative viewpoints.

The fairness doctrine was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in Red Lion Broadcasting Co. vs. FCC in 1969. Thus during the somewhat monopolistic age of television from the 1940's through most of the 1980's forced objectivity was imposed on television stations. Whenever the President spoke, the opposing party was given the opportunity to reply and local stations often gave guest editorial minutes to community members expressing views on a variety of public issues. The position of the U.S. Government at this time was forced fairness. The manner in which the television station met this mandate was reviewed by the FCC when

it came time for license renewal. Thus the threat of license revocation loomed as the ultimate punishment for a lack of fairness on the part of the television station.

One can easily see that this doctrine could be used by the wrong person in power and turned on its head. During his presidency, Richard Nixon established a White House "Communications Office" to put pressure on television stations. CBS President at the time, Fred Friendly, now says, "I suppose I was subtly influenced to do controversial subjects in a non controversial manner. I must confess that I tempered my news judgement and tailored my conscience more than once".

The late 1970's and the 1980's were a time of government deregulation. On August 4, 1987 the FCC repealed the fairness doctrine resulting in TV stations no longer being required to represent community views on controversial issues and to do so in a fair manner. This decision on the face of it has several democratic effects and objectives: 1) it removes a government control over television based on a government agencies's analysis of how well a particular station reported on public affairs, and it removes the possible chilling effect such a control might have on free speech; 2) it also recognizes the proliferation of television delivery mechanisms and the possible handling of controversial issues by a variety of delivery systems; 3) it further equalizes the treatment of the broadcast electronic press with that of the printed press which has never been regulated.

However, there is a down side to this government

deregulation policy that cuts to the heart of a democratic society based on representational government. The policy now endorses the right of a private broadcaster to act in his own private interest over the right of the public to hear views other than those of the TV Station. The arguments in favor of deregulation are further weakened by the following: 1) Other than President Nixon's abuse of power there is little evidence that broadcaster's suffered much intimidation from FCC enforcement of the fairness doctrine; 2) It is not necessary to bar others from the printing business in order to grant that privilege to a few, as it is with TV.

The deregulated era of television has just begun and the trend is away from controversial issues and toward "Happy News," away from fairness and toward systematic exclusion of minority views, for instance, one rarely sees a labor leader involved in discussions of economic trends on any of the stations. The government's democratic objectives and effects seem to favor the self interest of the private station owner over the publics' need to know.

The public of course does not demand to know. It uses its power to switch channels at the slightest discomfort. "Oh there's that old Jesse Jackson again." Switch to "The Today Show" and Bryant Gumball says, "Jane, you're making marks all over the couch with your pen." The camera switches to a close up of the couch, she giggles, and Willard the weatherman says, "Jane you're as big a slob as I am," she giggles, "Except I make marks

on my shirt on my big fat stomach." All giggle. Cut to Bryant with a big giggly smile who says: "And when we come back we'll talk about high infant mortality in the South." He's smiling and talking about dead babies, but the public may have already switched channels as soon as he mentioned the topic all inspite of the smile. Happy News.

Studies show that if a news story heightens a viewers anxiety level the viewer is likely to change channels particularly if the story challenges the viewers basic assumptions. Yes the public wants happy news - news as entertainment. And without the fear of government questions during licensing procedures, television stations are likely to devote less time and money to news programing and to do so in a less balanced more biased way. In the hands of a demagogue what a powerful tool for propaganda TV can be.

Having discussed the government's policy toward television I would now like to turn our attention to television's impact on democratic elections. As I have stated, about seven of ten Americans form political opinions from what they see on television and many become incapable of distinguishing between paid political advertisements and the news. Image matters on TV much more than what the candidate stands for. Design two or three TV commercials elevating your candidate and two or three creating anxiety in the minds of the viewer about the opponent, buy the time to play them and you're on your way to winning the election. Three minutes of frame to frame image manipulation

pitted against the opponents three minutes of video can strongly impact an election.

Who would deny that two video images; Willie Horton and the polluted Boston Harbor helped deprive Michael Dukakis of the presidency? I would argue that the following presidents had better television than their opponents: Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Carter, and Reagan, of course, the best of all.

Television news, the great promoter of the civil rights and peace movements, the medium that destroyed Richard Nixon met Ronald Reagan, and time and again he and his advisors proved that they were better at television than the news professionals. By the end of the Reagan Presidency reporters were remaining seated and polite at press conferences and the video images and sound bites displayed for the American public were controlled by the President and his men. For example, in 1984 President Reagan rode into an indoor basketball arena in South Dakota on a bouncing buckboard pulled by a truck which when shot at the right angle gave the appearance that he was riding a horse drawn buggy waiving a cowboy hat. Yahoo! The video of this event showed the President waving his hat as flags unfurled and confetti and balloons flew from everywhere; it was fantastic video and the networks and the American people lapped it up. The President provided the video.

Third party and independent candidates without the funds to purchase equal TV time are invisible and without validity. If you're not on television, then you do not exist. The majority of

voters make up their mind from what they see on TV. The United States is one of the few countries that permits unlimited paid political television advertising in elections. Reforms are needed if we are to stop our elections from continuing to be decided by sleazy commercials which appeal to ignorance and the bassist of human emotions including racial hatred as the Willie Horton ad attests.

Now I would like to discuss the socio-psychological effects of television on its viewers and the impact of these effects on democracy. Television viewers see the world as television presents it to them. What is most often repeated on TV is most often believed.

Television increases the pace and beat of attention and raises viewer expectations. A television presentation is not logical and sequential, it is multiple layered with several threads running simultaneously. The viewer must figure out the connections without verbal links. The result is that television viewers minds are filled with visuals of vicarious experiences. Dialectics rather than logic dominate viewer thinking patterns. Television has indeed changed the way we view reality. Attention spans are shorter but viewers have the ability to leave and return to subjects and pick back up where they left off. The superficiality and quick scenic and subject changes of television have had a detrimental effect on the ability of viewers to think. Many people who get their news from television are unable to articulate one reason for their decision to vote a certain way.

The language of TV is fragmented, patchwork and a-historical. Viewers are not encouraged to make connections or form hypotheses. This is done by the announcer who smoothly takes us to the next quick subject. If television is going to enhance democracy it must stop grabbing and repeating incessantly the most sensational image and sound bite from a news story. It must begin to take its time to develop an historical background and give all sides to an argument regardless of whether the cameraman obtained enough hot video to go with each point of view.

Television has aided great democratic changes. Its images of blacks suffering racial discrimination, of the poor and hungry faces of Appalachia, of soldiers dying in Vietnam, of AIDs patients shunned and mistreated; these images have moved the American people in positive and democratic ways, but the public seems tired and no longer capable of processing this kind of information as it once did. It is now more likely to switch channels at the sight of such an image in a search for Happy News.

The lead article in the August, 1984 The Atlantic Monthly was about television, it states:

> "In his democratic vistas, Walt Whitman called for a new homegrown American art form whose subject would be 'The average, the bodily, the concrete, the democratic, the popular. Television's situation comedy has ironically surfaced as the 20th century embodiment of his dream.
>
> The "average" has been computed and dramatized as archetype, the consumer world has been made "concrete", the "bodily" has been fetishized as the object of unabashed envy and voyeurism, all of this is nothing if not "popular".
>
> The processing of images that was Whitman's own poetry,

> and that he hoped would become the nation's, is lacking in the sitcom in but one respect; the technique of television art is not democratic but demographic. The producers, directors, writers, camera operators, set designers, and other artists of the medium are not, as Whitman hoped, breathing into democracy a new breath of life. Instead, for the sake of increased consumption they have contractually agreed to create the hallucinations of what another American poet, Allen Ginzberg, has called, the narcotic . . . haze of capitalism.
>
> The drug indeed is on the air and in the air. Fortunately, the integrity of the individual resides in the imagination's autonomy. The television set plays on and on in the mental hospital; the patient can sit in his chair, a spaced out and hopeless couch potato, or rise to the occasion of consciousness."

If the "patient" or our society is to overcome the schizophrenia and catatonia which can result from the information bombardment brought on by omnipresent television we must be educated to view television and to understand what it is doing to us.

There are a number of other issues which I would like to quickly raise with regard to television and democracy just to stimulate further thought or discussion.

1. Cable television has helped bring on fragmentation of the body politic by providing channels to reinforce narrow points of view. An example of this is the religious right reinforcing their point of view without regard to opposing points of view during countless hours of religious-political programming.
2. National Security has been used by presidents since World War II, to keep information from the American public. This device has been abused to the point of

the absurd.

3. Television news tells us who is going to win by polling way before an election is held. East coast results are sometimes announced before the polls close in the west. As a result people seem to feel, why vote, we already know who will win.

4. One hundred corporations in the United States provide 90% of the advertizing dollars that buy air time for television programing. These corporations have demonstrated a willingness to bow to political pressure from narrow issue groups.

5. Unlimited spending on elections with market control of the prices places access to public office further and further away from those without great financial resources.

6. The successful use of television to teach democratic values is well documented. But the possibilities are largely ignored and not implemented.

I believe that the situation I have described can be helped by a number of changes; including the following:

1) Bring back the Fairness Doctrine requiring TV stations to cover public affairs and to do so in a fair and objective manner.

2) Extend the fairness doctrine to cable via municipal enforcement of the regulation on the local level.

3) Restrict political advertising in volume, cost and

scheduling. Do not allow political adds during news broadcasts.

4) Provide access to television for points of view other than those espoused by the two parties.

5) Encourage the press to develop a self monitoring system similar to the ones which govern the behavior of lawyers, doctors and even cosmetologists.

6) Utilize television to teach democratic values and to criticize itself.

7) Investigate ways television can become a more effective participant in the democratic process. We can shop via television from home. Why not register to and vote from home? We could have instant referenda via TV on national and local issues, pure participatory democracy through technology.

Walt Whitman in his poem, "Democratic Vistas," said "to be a voter with the rest is not so much." Likewise to be a shopper/citizen viewer with the rest is not so much, considering the wonderful potential of the medium.

BIBLIOGRAPHY MATERIALS

Boller, Paul F., Jr. Presidential Campaigns. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Cater, Douglass and Adler, Richard. Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975.

Chu, Godwin C. and Schramm, Wilbur. Learning From Television: What the Research Says. Washington, D.C.: National Asscoaition of Educational Broadcasters, 1979.

Cross, Donna Woolfolk. Mediaspeak: How Television Makes Up Your Mind. New York: New American Library, 1983.

Donahue, Hugh Carter. The Battle to Control Broadcast News. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989.

Hansen, Lisa. The Somthers Brothers host: "And If I'm Elected..." California: Trans World Entertainment (U.S.A.), 1984. (video tape)

Kaplan, Peter and Paul Slansky. "Golden Moments": Connoisseur: The Guide to the Civilized World. September 1989; pgs. 134-164.

Marc, David. "Understanding Television": The Atlantic Monthly. August 1984; pgs. 33 - 44.

McLuhan, Marshall and Fiore, Quentin. The Medium is the Message. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.

Miller, James. "Democracy is in the Streets" From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987.

New York University School of Law. Law and the Television of the 80's. New York: Oceana Publications, Inc., 1983.

O'Bryan, Kenneth G. Writing for Instructional Television. Washington, D.C.: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1981.

Pool, Ithiel de Sola. Technologies of Freedom. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Rubin, Bernard. Media Politics, & Democracy. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1977.

Seib, Philip. Who's In Charge: How the Media Shape News and Politicians Win Votes. Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1987.

Singer, Dorothy G., Singer, Jerome L., and Zuckerman, Diana M. Teaching Television: How to Use TV to Your Child's Advantage. New York: The Dial Press, 1981.

Television and the Presidency. California: Zenger Video. (video tape)

Tunstall, Jeremy. The Media Are Amercian: Anglo American Media in the World. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

Williams, Mason. The Mason Williams F.C.C. Report. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1969.